

Georgian Investigators Question Former Prime Minister

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Georgian investigators questioned former Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili on Saturday in the latest of a string of legal cases brought against members of the ousted administration of President Mikheil Saakashvili.

The detentions of former state officials since billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's coalition defeated Saakashvili's party in parliamentary elections in October has raised opposition complaints of a political witch hunt and prompted a warning from the U.S.

More than 20 former officials, including a former interior minister and the army's acting chief of staff, have been arrested and charged with abuse of power, illegal confinement or illegally obtaining personal information.

The Interior Ministry said Saturday that it had opened an investigation against Merabishvili on suspicions that he had used a forged document and attempted an illicit crossing of the

state border.

Merabishvili, now secretary general of Saakashvili's United National Movement, visited Armenia on Friday on a one-day trip as a member of an official delegation led by Saakashvili, who remains in the office of president until elections next year.

An employee of the Presidential Protocol Service submitted a passport purporting to be Merabishvili's to border control staff at Tbilisi Airport on departure.

Border control agents saw that the passport bore the name Levan Maisuradze, but a photo of Merabishvili had been affixed to it, an Interior Ministry spokeswoman said.

"In order not to hamper or cause any problems to the visit of the state delegation, Vano Merabishvili was allowed to submit the real passport, and therefore no immediate legal action was taken against him," she said. "In connection with this case, Vano Merabishvili will be summoned and questioned today."

Merabishvili said the case was fabricated.

"I understand that a new government wants to intimidate everyone, but what they say and do today is beyond all limits," Merabishvili told journalists.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Georgia on Thursday not to follow the path of Ukraine into an era of political witch hunts.

"We do hope that everything that is done with respect to prosecuting any potential wrongdoers is done transparently in accord with due process and the rule of law," Clinton said in remarks with visiting Georgian Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze in Washington.

A senior State Department official said Clinton's message to Georgia was clear, citing backsliding in Ukraine, where the prosecution of opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko has been roundly criticized by Western governments as selective justice.

"A key message that we are giving the new Georgian government, including today, is do not follow the course of Ukraine. Do not become Ukraine," the official said.

Panjikidze took pains to reassure Clinton over how the cases would go forward and "was very clear in understanding that they know the world is watching," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told a news briefing.

Panjikidze said in an interview Friday that she did not take Clinton's warning as strong criticism, and she told Clinton that "it's just about the restoration of justice, and everything will be done according to the rule of law."

She said Georgia was willing to invite international observers to monitor the justice process.

(Reuters, MT)

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